

Aeschylus ca. 460 BCE

**"THE ACHAIANS HAVE GOT TROY,  
UPON THIS VERY DAY"**

from AGAMEMNON

THE Achaians have got Troy, upon this very day.  
I think the city echoes with a clash of cries.  
Pour vinegar and oil into the selfsame bowl  
you cannot say they mix in friendship, but fight on.  
Thus various sound the voices of the conquerors  
and conquered, from the opposition of their fates.  
Trojans are stooping now to gather in their arms  
their dead, husbands and brothers; children lean to clasp  
the aged who begot them, crying upon the death  
of those most dear, from lips that never will be free.  
The Achaians have their midnight work after the fighting  
that sets them down to feed on all the city has,  
ravenous, headlong, by no rank and file assigned,  
but as each man has drawn his shaken lot by chance.  
And in the Trojan houses that their spears have taken  
they settle now, free of the open sky, the frosts  
and dampness of the evening; without sentinels set  
they sleep the sleep of happiness the whole night through.  
And if they reverence the gods who hold the city  
and all the holy temples of the captured land,  
they, the despoilers, might not be despoiled in turn.  
Let not their passion overwhelm them; let no lust  
seize on these men to violate what they must not.  
The run to safety and home is yet to make; they must turn  
the pole and run the backstretch of the doubled course.  
Yet, though the host come home without offence to high

gods, even so the anger of these slaughtered men  
may never sleep.—Oh, let there be no fresh wrong done!

AESCHYLUS

*Translated by Richmond Lattimore*

<http://www.greatbooks.org/soul/sample.html>

## **The Diameter of the Bomb**

Yehuda Amichai

Israeli  
poet  
speaking  
of a terrorist  
bombing

**The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimeters  
and the diameter of its effective range about seven meters,  
with four dead and eleven wounded.  
And around these, in a larger circle  
of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered  
and one graveyard. But the young woman  
who was buried in the city she came from,  
at a distance of more than a hundred kilometers,  
enlarges the circle considerably,  
and the solitary man mourning her death  
at the distant shores of a country far across the sea  
includes the entire world in the circle.  
And I won't even mention the crying of orphans  
that reaches up to the throne of God and  
beyond, making  
a circle with no end and no God.**

"The Diameter of the Bomb," from THE SELECTED POETRY OF YEHUDA AMICHAI, by Yehuda Amichai. Translated by Chana Bloch. English translation copyright 1986, 1996 by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell. Reprinted by permission of Chana Bloch.

## *I SAW THE VISION OF ARMIES*

I saw the vision of armies;  
And I saw, as in noiseless dreams, hundreds of battle-flags;  
Borne through the smoke of the battles, and pierc'd with mis-  
siles, I saw them,  
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and  
bloody;  
And at last but a few shreds of the flags left on the staffs, (and  
all in silence,)  
And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,  
And the white skeletons of young men—I saw them;  
I saw the debris and debris of all dead soldiers;  
But I saw they were not as was thought;  
They themselves were fully at rest—they suffer'd not;  
The living remain'd and suffer'd—the mother suffer'd,  
And the wife and the child, and the musing comrade suffer'd,  
And the armies that remained suffer'd.

WALT WHITMAN

*Civil War*

*Whitman served as  
a nurse /*

Certain words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates. —Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (Scribner: New York, 1929/1957) pp. 184-185

Hemingway served as an ambulance  
driver

WWI

Poetry of Wilfred Owen

*Dulce Et Decorum Est*

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .  
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.

BM has two drafts, the earlier of which gives, beneath the title,  
*To Jessie Pope etc* (cancelled), and *To a certain Poetess*. HO has two  
drafts, one subscribed *To Jessie Pope etc*, the other, *To a certain  
Poetess*.

Owen served  
as a  
line officer  
in the  
trenches

From The Collected Poems of  
Wilfred Owen  
New Directions Press  
1964

In a letter to his mother, dated August 1917, Owen wrote *Here is a gas poem, done yesterday.*

- l. 8: BM (a) has *tired, outstripped*  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{gas-shells} \\ \textit{Five-Nines} \end{array} \right.$  deleted, and the line reads *Of gas-shells dropping softly that dropped behind.* EB amended to *Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.* The earlier BM draft shows two alternatives for this line, both of ten syllables. HO (a) gives *Of tired, outstripped five-nines that dropped behind.* HO (b) gives *Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.* After line 8, BM (b) has four lines which in the later version were first altered a little, then cancelled—

*Then somewhere near in front: Whew . . . fup . . . fop . . .  
fup . . .  
Gas-shells or duds? We loosened masks, in case—  
And listened . . . Nothing . . . Far rumouring of Krupp . . .  
Then stinging poison hit us in the face.*

- l. 20: HO (b) *His hanging face, tortured for your own sin*  
l. 23: EB omits *Obscene as cancer*  
ll. 23-4: these were substituted, at a late stage of composition, for  
*And think how, once, his head was like a bud,  
Fresh as a country rose, and keen, and young,—*

wwI

## my sweet old etcetera

my sweet old etcetera  
aunt lucy during the recent

war could and what  
is more did tell you just  
what everybody was fighting

for,  
my sister

Isabel created hundreds  
(and  
hundreds)of socks not to  
mention fleaproof earwarmers  
etcetera wristers etcetera, my  
mother hoped that

i would die etcetera  
bravely of course my father used  
to become hoarse talking about how it was  
a privilege and if only he  
could meanwhile my

self etcetera lay quietly  
in the deep mud et

cetera  
(dreaming,  
et  
cetera, of  
Your smile  
eyes knees and of your Etcetera)

## ee cummings

Cummings served in ambulance corps  
and was mistakenly interned as  
a combatant

III. - I HATE THE MOON

(After a moonlight patrol near the Brickstacks)

I hate the Moon, though it makes most people glad,  
And they giggle and talk of silvery beams - you know!  
But *she* says the look of the Moon drives people mad,  
And that's the thing that always frightens me so.

I hate it worst when it's cruel and round and bright,  
And you can't make out the marks on its stupid face,  
Except when you shut your eyelashes, and all night  
The sky looks green, and the world's a horrible place.

I like the stars, and especially the Big Bear  
And the W star, and one like a diamond ring,  
But I *hate* the Moon and its horrible stony stare,  
And I know one day it'll do me some dreadful thing.

A DEAD BOCHE\*

To you who'd read my songs of War  
And only hear of blood and fame,  
I'll say (you've heard it said before)  
'War's Hell!' and if you doubt the same,  
To-day I found in Mametz Wood  
A certain cure for lust of blood:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,  
In a great mess of things unclean,  
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk  
With clothes and face a sodden green,  
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,  
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.



Siegfried Sassoon

line officer

WWI

a poet before the  
war and  
an aristocrat

## The Kiss

To these I turn, in these I trust—  
Brother Lead and Sister Steel.  
To his blind power I make appeal,  
I guard her beauty clean from rust.

He spins and burns and loves the air,  
And splits a skull to win my praise;  
But up the nobly marching days  
She glitters naked, cold and fair.

Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this:  
That in good fury he may feel  
The body where he sets his heel  
Quail from your downward darting kiss.

## The Hero

'Jack fell as he'd have wished,' the Mother said,  
And folded up the letter that she'd read.  
'The Colonel writes so nicely.' Something broke  
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.  
She half looked up. 'We mothers are so proud  
Of our dead soldiers.' Then her face was bowed.

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.  
He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies  
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.  
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes  
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,  
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine,  
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine  
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried  
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,  
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care  
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

*Enemies*

He stood alone in some queer sunless place  
Where Armageddon ends. Perhaps he longed  
For days he might have lived; but his young face  
Gazed forth untroubled: and suddenly there thronged  
Round him the hulking Germans that I shot  
When for his death my brooding rage was hot.

He stared at them, half-wondering; and then  
They told him how I'd killed them for his sake—  
Those patient, stupid, sullen ghosts of men;  
And still there seemed no answer he could make.  
At last he turned and smiled. One took his hand  
Because his face could make them understand.

*The Tombstone-Maker*

He primed his loose red mouth and leaned his head  
Against a sorrowing angel's breast, and said:  
'You'd think so much bereavement would have made  
'Unusual big demands upon my trade.  
'The War comes cruel hard on some poor folk;  
'Unless the fighting stops I'll soon be broke.'

He eyed the Cemetery across the road.  
'There's scores of bodies out abroad, this while,  
'That should be here by rights. They little know'd  
'How they'd get buried in such wretched style.'

'I told him with a sympathetic grin,  
'That Germans boil dead soldiers down for fat;  
And he was horrified. 'What shameful sin!  
'O sir, that Christian souls should come to that!'

ww II

*THE DEATH OF THE  
BALL TURRET GUNNER*

FROM my mother's sleep I fell into the State  
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.  
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,  
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

RANDALL JARRELL

*A REFUSAL TO MOURN THE DEATH,  
BY FIRE, OF A CHILD IN LONDON*

NEVER until the mankind making  
Bird beast and flower  
Fathering and all humbling darkness  
Tells with silence the last light breaking  
And the still hour  
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

And I must enter again the round  
Zion of the water bead  
And the synagogue of the ear of corn  
Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound  
Or sow my salt seed  
In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child's death.  
I shall not murder

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The mankind of her going with a grave truth  
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath  
With any further  
Elegy of innocence and youth.

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,  
Robed in the long friends,  
The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother  
Secret by the unmourning water  
Of the riding Thames.  
After the first death, there is no other.

DYLAN THOMAS

SONG

Vietnam

DENISE LEVERTOV

1923-

247

*What Were They Like?*

- 1) Did the people of Vietnam  
use lanterns of stone?
- 2) Did they hold ceremonies  
to reverence the opening of buds?
- 3) Were they inclined to quiet laughter?
- 4) Did they use bone and ivory,  
jade and silver, for ornament?
- 5) Had they an epic poem?
- 6) Did they distinguish between speech and singing?

- 1) Sir, their light hearts turned to stone.  
It is not remembered whether in gardens  
stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.
- 2) Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom,  
but after the children were killed  
there were no more buds.
- 3) Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth.
- 4) A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy.  
All the bones were charred.
- 5) It is not remembered. Remember,  
most were peasants; their life  
was in rice and bamboo.  
When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies  
and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,  
maybe fathers told their sons old tales.  
When bombs smashed those mirrors  
there was time only to scream.
- 6) There is an echo yet  
of their speech which was like a song.  
It was reported their singing resembled  
the flight of moths in moonlight.  
Who can say? It is silent now.

Vietnam

ALLEN GINSBERG

1926-

246

*A Vow*

I will haunt these States  
with beard bald head  
eyes staring out plane window,  
hair hanging in Greyhound bus midnight

leaning over taxicab seat to admonish  
an angry cursing driver  
hand lifted to calm  
his outraged vehicle  
that I pass with the Green Light of common law.

Common Sense, Common law, common tenderness  
& common tranquillity  
our means in America to control the money munching  
war machine, bright lit industry  
everywhere digesting forests & excreting soft pyramids  
of newsprint, Redwood and Ponderosa patriarchs  
silent in Meditation murdered & regurgitated as smoke,  
sawdust, screaming ceilings of Soap Opera,  
thick dead Lives, slick Advertisements  
for Gubernatorial big guns  
burping Napalm on palm rice tropic greenery.

Dynamite in forests,  
boughs fly slow motion  
thunder down ravine,  
Helicopters roar over National Park, Mekong Swamp,  
Dynamite fire blasts thru Model Villages,  
Violence screams at Police, Mayors get mad over radio,  
Drop the Bomb on Niggers!  
drop Fire on the gook China  
Frankenstein Dragon  
waving its tail over Bayonne's domed Aluminum  
oil reservoir!

I'll haunt these States all year  
gazing bleakly out train windows, blue airfield  
red TV network on evening plains,  
decoding radar Provincial editorial paper message,  
deciphering Iron Pipe laborers' curses as  
clanging hammers they raise steamshovel claws  
over Puerto Rican agony lawyers' screams in slums.

October 11, 1966

Vietnam

Facing It

By Yusef Komunyakaa (b 1947, Vietnam 1965-67, this from *Dien Cai Dau* 1988)

My black face fades,  
hiding inside the black granite.  
I said I wouldn't,  
dammit: No tears.  
I'm stone. I'm flesh.  
My clouded reflection eyes me  
like a bird of prey, the profile of night  
slanted against morning. I turn  
this way--the stone lets me go.  
I turn that way--I'm inside  
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial  
again, depending on the light  
to make a difference.  
I go down the 58,022 names,  
half-expecting to find  
my own in letters like smoke.  
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;  
I see the booby trap's white flash.  
Names shimmer on a woman's blouse  
but when she walks away  
the names stay on the wall.  
Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's  
wings cutting across my stare.  
The sky. A plane in the sky.  
A white vet's image floats  
closer to me, then his pale eyes  
look through mine. I'm a window.  
He's lost his right arm  
inside the stone. In the black mirror  
a woman's trying to erase names:  
No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

<http://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/komunyakaa.php>

has an oral version.